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Last Flight to Byzantium: *Memoirs of Mary in One*

What can I but enumerate old themes?

.....
Now that my ladder's gone,
I must lie down where all the ladders start,
In the foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart.

W.B. Yeats

THE nature of art and reality and their relation to each other has always been a major preoccupation of artists and acquired a new intensity in the twentieth century with both the certainties and doubts resulting from scientific discoveries and the growth of new disciplines in the humanities, particularly psychology, psychoanalysis and various branches of linguistics. Unlike some of his contemporaries who have taken part in debates on the developing history of ideas, Patrick White has generally refrained from expressing interest in them and has only referred explicitly to the religious and psychological thought that influenced him, such as Jewish mysticism and Jungian psychology. He asserted on various occasions that he was not an intellectual but brought forth whatever he had to express through the senses and intuition (*Flaws* 236). Certainly, he was not given to abstract statements but a preoccupation with the nature of reality and its relation to art does lie at the heart of his work and informs all its major aspects.

White has been variously described as a late or neo-Romantic, a late Modernist and a Victorian realist, the latter by those who take him at his own word when he says that his novels are 'quite old-fashioned and traditional' and declares his affinity with nineteenth-century novelists (Herring and Wilkes 139). However, the displacement of reality towards the inner world, beneath the surface, as he himself explained, is a distinctly modernist feature. There is more than a simple inversion between the 'real' and the 'unreal', for it is through their hyper-sensitive perception of external reality that his visionary or imaginative characters discover an inner one. The concrete world often dissolves in the moment of vision or the realistic frame of the narrative is repeatedly fissured, as in the telepathic passages of *Voss* or in the 'Jardin exotique' section in *The Aunt's Story* when the purely imaginary becomes more real than actual experience, though vision is achieved through what is first a sensual apprehension of the physical world.

In this respect, White comes close to Wilson Harris's statement: 'By infinity I mean that one is constantly breaking down things in order to sense a vision *through* things' (Harris, 'Interview' 52). In 'More Than One Horizon' (1978) Bill Ashcroft rightly quotes the first epigraph to *The Solid Mandala*, 'There is another world but it is in this one.' He convincingly argues that White is primarily 'a novelist of consciousness' for whom 'the transcendent is located in the real' (125). But I don't agree that '[r]ealism and mysticism are, in one sense one and the same because in every act of consciousness that . . . which transcends the physical, is implicated in the horizon of the object perceived' (125). It does not necessarily imply that realism gives access to the transcendent, for even in its latest developments it remains predominantly mimetic and, as a mode of representation, incompatible both with White's repeated attempts to convey an otherworldly reality through metaphor and with the fragmentation or dissolution of a realistically perceptible world when such moments of vision are achieved.

Admittedly, *mimesis* is not necessarily confined to the mere reproduction of a limited social reality. Even in Aristotle's *Poetics* a purely duplicating representation and its seeming opposite, i.e. creation *ex nihilo* of images reproducing the artist's inner world, are shown to be mutually enriching (Somville 51). Auerbach has shown the possibilities of *mimesis* from Plato to Proust and Virginia Woolf (1946), and only ten years ago Linda Hutcheon coined the expression 'process mimesis' to emphasise the dynamism of the creative process in metafiction (Hutcheon 5 and 43). More recently, George Steiner explained *mimesis*, which he implicitly equates with creation, as imitation of the first act of creation, a *fiat* which always comes after the first. Hence '[s]ome finality of realism, of socially sanctioned reproduction' is in his view 'an inescapable fact' (202).¹ Carolyn Bliss uses Auerbach's terminology 'figural realism' to suggest that White's 'characters and events "mean" both themselves and something else' (*Patrick White's Fiction* 203). But when alluding to his departures from realistic handling, she argues that White's figural realism and its limitations are themselves an aspect of failure (the theme she concentrates on) since in his chosen mode of representation 'he can only finally mediate meaning beyond his comprehension' (204). The same can, of course, be said of much great art, and there is a facile identification here of form with theme. Artists, White among them, have repeatedly found, in Coleridge's words, 'the appropriate form' to convey the inexpressible. Moreover, 'figural realism' does not adequately account for White's narratives of inner exploration and even less for the arousal of the substance of fiction from the unconscious into consciousness which he saw as the major phase in his creative process.²

¹ Though this definition of *mimesis* may apply to White, I disagree with the emphasis on realism which takes no account of much poetic or experimental fiction but this is not the place to develop the point.

² See, for example, his conversation with Thelma Herring and G.A. Wilkes, 139.

There has been a tendency to polarise the significance of White's fiction by concentrating either on the religious and his visionary characters' longing for the sublime or on the role of the unconscious both in the artist's creative process and his characters' self-individuation.³ My impression is that they cannot be separated and that, for White too, 'the way up is the way down' (Eliot 41). What may not have been sufficiently emphasised is the role of the imagination, often taken for granted, in the protagonists' apprehension of reality and of their own nature. I agree with Tacey that 'White's art is a dialectical process between the primary impulses of the unconscious and the formative powers of the artist' and that 'the unconscious itself seeks expression in the world of form' (214 and 215). But he seems to think that imagination, which he associates with surrealism and those he calls 'cultists of the imagination' (whoever they are), is synonymous with 'aesthetic formalization' only. It is surely more than that and cannot be so easily separated from consciousness. Imagination in White's work is indebted to Romanticism in so far as alone or in conjunction with a spiritual experience (particularly in his non-artistic visionaries), it stimulates the perception of an otherworldly reality within and beyond appearances.⁴ Where it differs from the Romantic concept is in its frequently, though not systematically, solipsistic drift and ambivalent effects. Yet it is the intensity of the protagonists' imaginative life which makes them pursue 'the extraordinary' and accounts for their multiple personality as in *Memoirs of Many in One*.

The contradictory, even controversial, responses to this novel and its comparative neglect since it was published may indicate that critics were not quite sure how to take it.⁵ Had White really brought out a post-modernist masterpiece, a humorous parody, or did the novel toll 'the end of genius' (Tacey)? I see this novel, to begin with, as a remarkable meditation on old age and its anxieties, what T.S. Eliot called '[the] folly, [the] fear of fear and frenzy' of old men (26) rather than their serenity and wisdom, though the protagonist here is supposed to be a woman. In this respect, it is closer to Margaret Laurence's *The Stone Angel* than to White's own *Eye of the Storm* with which it has been compared because both novels deal with the life end of an old woman, both untender mothers of a disappointing progeny, in *Memoirs* the dutiful Hilda and her evasive brother Hal, a homosexual who lives with a Jewish priest, a convert to Catholicism. As White indicated, however, the earlier novel was inspired by his mother's old age (*Flaws* 149), whereas *Memoirs* is clearly about his own. Like Laurence's Hagar Shipley, Alex Xenophon Demirjian Gray defies, and tries to escape from, those who see her as old and mad, criticise her shocking

The fullest study of the role of the unconscious in White's fiction is David Tacey's *Patrick White: Fiction and the Unconscious*.

³ White's affinity with Romanticism has been discussed by John Docker but he deals with White's emphasis on nature as opposed to society, not with the role of imagination in his work. To my knowledge, there are only three full-length articles on it, by Veronica Brady, Carolyn Bliss and Peter Beatson, apart from David Tacey's discussion in his book on White, 200-209.

behaviour and try to imprison her within their own notion of what the respectable old should be. Both heroines are unrepentingly aware of their own contradictions while keenly sensitive to other people's perception of a behaviour which they cannot or will not alter. Alex, however, is not just a character in her own right. As White's alter ego, she embodies his obsessions and, as reviewers pointed out, rehearses aspects of his earlier fiction, though with a difference. I read this novel as White's dramatisation and fictionalisation of his own ageing imagination now turned upon itself, attempting to assess its role and intent on enjoying its last flights, more poignantly conscious than any outsider that they are the last. As Veronica Brady sensitively puts it, 'White here delivers himself up to the panic of the personal' (72). The panic, however, is largely counterbalanced by his lucidity and the final acceptance of the helplessness of old age.

The major aspects of this novel all relate to the role of the imagination and what appears to be White's perception of it in both life and art. Unlike their eighteenth-century predecessors — who claimed to be editing accounts of actual events because fiction was immoral (since untrue) and imagination often suspected of being an effect of madness (as it is by White's unimaginate characters) — contemporary writers, among them White in this novel and Harris, foreground their creative selves and their dialogue with it and efface themselves into mere editors of their fictive material. For both the Word is flesh and fiction what Harris calls 'texts of reality' or 'texts of being' ('Fabric' 176 and 180), exemplified in White's fiction in the 'mad' characters' blurring of the so-called 'real' with the imaginary. For both writers character creation is the actualisation of inner selves. In Harris's words, 'personality is cognizant of many existences [who] are not sovereign devices [but] agents of personality' ('Interview' 53). Both he and White see the individual consciousness, particularly the artist's, as a theatre and a vessel (as Duffield explains in *The Visector* 571) in which these existences, aroused from what Harris calls 'the dismemberment of ourselves into others' ('Oedipus' 15), act out 'a drama of living consciousness' (Harris, *Tradition* 34). Both writers have fictionalised the androgyny of the creative self, White most obviously in *The Solid Mandala*, *The Tvyborn Affair* and, of course, *Memoirs*. A major difference between them is that Harris's inner plural world is also social, a community born of his perception of his country's oppressive past and the subsistence of eclipsed populations in the collective unconscious, whereas, if one is to believe White himself, his inner theatre grew out of his individual psychological make-up. In *Flaws in the Glass* he repeatedly refers to his many inner selves (20, 32, 35, 113, 182), to the many-facetedness and protean character (153) many creative artists claim. Where he differs from most is not so much in attributing his creative sensibility to the feminine in himself (34-35) but to what he sees as a specifically homosexual perception or insight (135, 154). He clearly sublimates, even spiritualises, his homosexuality, as when he presents his life companion, Manoly Lascaris, as the central and solid mandala in his

life (100, 116). By a happy coincidence, the latter, also born in 1912, was clearly the spiritual twin he had been looking for (35). He may also have inspired White's metaphorical Yeatsian use of Byzantium as the city of the imagination and art.

Although usually suspicious of the biographical fallacy, I find these elements helpful to understand *Memoirs*, which seems as intensely personal as it is provocative, self-satisfying and masochistic, like *Flaws*, and pervaded by a curious mixture of innocence and sarcasm. That Patrick and Alex are one as well as each other's creation is obvious enough from what each says about their association. As Alex writes 'He and I have been so close we have lain in bed together' (88), one is reminded of Arthur and Waldo in their parents' bed in *The Solid Mandala*. They 'know each other by heart' (90), and she says of her son Hal that if he originated as her husband's sperm, he was also 'what Patrick and I both looked for as part of our complicated, many-faceted lives' (53). Patrick acknowledges 'her life was mine historically, personally... creatively' (179) and refers to her papers as 'recording our actual and created lives' (180) while he is also aware that the saints and demons she wrestles with are an extension of his own creations (185). She too is aware of the others' states of mind and doings, as when Hilda comes home after discussing with Patrick the need to have Alex committed and the latter recreates their meeting accurately (65) without being told about it. Perhaps less obviously than the dialectical interplay between them, the narrative structure confirms their dichotomised oneness as, close to two thirds of the text, the editor's remarks are no longer carefully separated from Alex's memoirs but merge into them as if he too found it increasingly difficult to avoid the blurring between reality and fiction that Alex is subject to, as when she emerges from the dream of herself as nun Cassini on the island of Nisos and is distressed at not finding the *tagari* she carried through her dream. As *Flaws in the Glass* shows (21), White himself had been doing this through much of his creative life and called it 'a disturbing marriage between life and imagination' ('Truth and Fiction' 20).

Alex's writings are hardly memoirs, unless of her imagined lives, since the narrative Patrick edits deals with the present just before her death interspersed with very few memories, though whether these actually happened doesn't matter at all, like her evanescent moment of liberation followed by failure when she danced in the Hitler Hotel in Washington DC, or her haunting sense of guilt after killing her husband's dog (reminiscent of Voss perversely killing his dog) and after her husband's suicide which she sees as 'only a half-murder' (73) clearly committed by herself. Even her escapade and stay with the Dobbins (Mrs Dobbin could be another Mrs Poulter or Mrs Oakes and Alex feels abandoned by her like Ellen Roxburgh by her protectress) appears as both actual and imagined, experienced at the same level of consciousness as Hal's visit: '[o]ne day after I returned from my stay with the Dobbins, Hal appeared. I could sense he was materializing' (54). Her dance in Washington DC is a dream within the Watson's

Bay episode. Her ride on a dappled mare, a 'therapy of revolutionary violence' (72) against new-rich snobbery at a Sydney garden party, could have been inspired by the actress who 'rode a white horse in support of freedom' in post-war Athens (*Flaws* 115), though inevitably Alex's gesture occurs in trivialised circumstances. Daise Morrow had taken the derelict Ossie Coogan into her house (as the Dump) opens out without any transition onto another level of consciousness as she imagines herself as nun Benedict on an excursion in the Blue Mountains, looking after the saintly Bernadette with whom she gets lost and who could be a further duplication of her fragmented self. Alex's return to the actual world after her inconclusive imaginary journeys is not, as one would expect, an awakening to the ordinary world but the reverse: '[t]here was nothing for it but to regain unconsciousness' (73) or 'I turned and ran... into a formlessness of time and space' (83).

As opposed then to the predictability of Hilda, the keeper of the family archives who equates truth with literalness and the actual on one given plane of existence, Alex experiences a wide spectrum of states of consciousness, shifting from one layer to another as she supposedly writes down the striking episodes of her life through dream, reverie, fantasy, memory, intuitions and metaphysical questioning about her existential meaning, mixing the trivial and the serious, the comic or even farcical with the tragic, arousing laughter and pity, delight and revulsion. An endless performer, she lacks a clear sense of identity, claiming the negative capability which enables her to say 'I've always been anything I intended to' (49), like Eudoxia claiming in her writing 'I can experience *all* by efforts of will or imagination (*The Twyborn Affair* 26). The roles she performs or attempts to assume have been recurring personae in White's fiction whether artist, scapegoat, would-be murderer, whore and/or nun. But in her aged clumsiness and fear of letting Patrick down, yet also fear of Patrick enclosed in his 'Mother Superior' attitude, she vainly tries to draw him out to discuss their joint purpose, the search for 'the unanswerable, the unattainable' (88). It is as if, at this stage, he felt the need to restrain this much freer self, to resist her eccentricities and dissociate himself from her 'madness' by withdrawing behind a guarded and more cautious mask, of which she is fully conscious when she explains her hesitation before acting: 'Patrick must have got into me' (95). Still she goes on exploring what remains of her potentialities with the self-confidence and ineradicable doubts common to artists.

Though her style is, on the whole, deliberately unadorned, familiar, often colloquial as befits self speaking to self, her writing encompasses a wide range of different tones and registers. In the interwoven episodes of her search for the mystic and the Benedict/Bernadette dream she seems to be simultaneously pursuing two different narrative strands on a similar theme (sanctity) as if experimenting with their respective potentiality. She approaches her own

impersonations alternately as a first- and a third-person narrator (76, 109) and sometimes seems to be at once describing herself in action and editing her own script (111). However, even when obviously 'dreamt', her 'flights' of imagination (65, 66) as she calls them ('waking dream' is another, Keatsian expression she uses [85, 167]) are rooted in the concrete even at their most fanciful or their most repulsive. There has always been a strong scatological element in White's writing and a clear suggestion that the seeds of creation are fertilised by what he calls *Dreck* in *The Vivisector* (392). He could have said, like Yeats in his 'Crazy Jane' poem, 'love has pitched his mansion in/The place of excrement;/For nothing can be sole or whole/That has not been rent.' 'The Excremental Vision' that Middleton Murry saw as a product of insanity in Swift features prominently in Alex's memoirs. But as Norman O'Brown explained in his defence of Swift, the latter's vision expresses his 'insight into the universal neurosis of mankind' (514) and prefigures Freud in his perception of the link between anal eroticism and sublimation. White's fiction has always similarly emphasised 'the relation between higher and lower, spiritual and physical' (519) with the additional insistence here on physical decline due to old age.

In the sublimation of lower into higher, the physical into the spiritual or the reconciliation of opposites, imagination is an essential agent of transformation and appendage to religious experiences, conducive to human sympathy and what White calls lovingkindness in some of his novels. That it makes for union is perhaps best illustrated in the purely imaginary coming together of Voss and Laura or Eddie Twyborn and his mother at the end of *The Twyborn Affair*. In *Memoirs* imagination is by turns a factor of aesthetic and/or religious experience, as when Alex conjures up an antique world of beauty on Nisos (77-78) and later has a vision of a 'miraculous Being' (139) on her tour of outback Australia. But the merging of art with the spiritual in White's work, particularly in *The Twyborn Affair*, *Memoirs* and more straightforwardly *Flaws in the Glass*, finds its most significant expression in his identification of the imagination with Byzantium, itself the seat of a shift in art from the imitation of nature to the revelation of a heavenly world as well as a persecuted source of the imaginary. In *Flaws in the Glass* the chapter entitled 'Journeys' describes only journeys to Greece and what used to be the Byzantine world. Byzantium (never Istanbul) is called *The Polis*, as if it were the only antique city-state and the major cradle of Western civilisation. White's journeys with his friend Manoly Lascaris are clearly pilgrimages to the sources of the imaginary and the spiritual, even if at times a cause of disappointment or irritation because also human. Like many of White's Greek characters, the Lascaris family, apparently of aristocratic descent, had taken refuge in Alexandria (at one stage part of the Byzantine empire) after the sack of Smyrna by the Turks in 1922, which White usually calls 'the catastrophe' without further explanation in his writing (see, for example, 'An Evening at Sissy Kamaras'). Interestingly, 'Laskaris' was the name of an

emperor of Nicaea whose successor was a Vatzes, the name of Eudoxia/Eddie Twyborn's lover in *The Twyborn Affair*. Like Alex in *Memoirs*, who repeatedly calls herself 'Empress of Byzantium and Nicaea' (67, 72, 116, 158, 164), Angelos Vatzes sees himself as a Byzantine emperor, while at the end of their lives both, identifying with their wet nurse, appear as old Greek peasant women (*Memoirs* 106, 167 and *The Twyborn Affair* 95), in whom White sees the true aristocracy of Greece (*Fiarws* 213). Since he keeps referring to Alexandria as Alex in his autobiography, it seems that his protagonist in *Memoirs* represents both the imagination and the Greek/Egyptian city that fertilised it. Her four names not only evoke her multicultural personality, 'a synthesis of the far and the near, Europe and Australia' (*Fiarws* 210) as well as her vocation as a writer (Xenophon), when she says 'I can never have enough [names]... A freshly acquired name gives me a fresh leave of life' (177), she conveys in very simple terms the creative spirit's endless capacity for exploration and discovery through ever-new identities and equates this creative role playing with life itself. It is also her way of finding out 'whether the lives [she has] lived amount to anything' (35). In Alex's names and identities, the 'Many in One' of the title, merge the creative process and its spiritual, metaphysical implications, the constantly renewable multiple sensible world and the mysterious One White's artists emulate, for like *The Vivisector*, the title of this novel refers to both God and man. In the former novel '[Hurtle] was fidgeting to create this child. Or more than one. Or many in the one' (405), while, talking about her lives and the difficulty of conveying their essence in words, Alex stresses and expresses ambiguously her kinship with and longing for the One: 'I don't aspire to God the Father — but one of his understudies' (87).

In most of White's novels, the moments of vision, of liberation and serenity, the fading of limitations or an evanescent sense of harmony have been conveyed through dance, the 'Romantic Image' he revives through Theodora Goodman, Arthur Brown and Lotte Lippmann, to mention only a few. Dance is also for Alex an essential means of liberation both from others and from her solipsistic self ('I I', 174), the actualisation, even when only visualised, of her flights of imagination. Dance, and implicitly music, convey what words are powerless to communicate, but in this mode of expression too the body finally reduces her spirit to powerlessness. In spite of its premonitory disastrous ending, her flamboyant dance in Washington DC is Alex's last flight of its kind. In a waking dream in the Park her imaginary flight through dance prior to her attempt to communicate in words is clearly impeded by both physical disability and her matter-of-fact daughter Hilda (85-87). But on her theatrical tour dance can still be a substitute for words and express the essence of being to an uncomprehending

⁶ Much of Frank Kermode's analysis of the dancer in Yeats's poetry and of Byzantium as a metaphor for the unity of body and spirit is relevant to White's use of them though, as suggested above, White's idealisation of Byzantium is more directly rooted in the concrete and largely due to his association with Manoly Lascaris. See the chapter on 'The Dancer' in Frank Kermode, *The Romantic Image*.

audience (136-37). Like the experiences she imagines, her dances (including those she only wishes to execute, like Spiro in 'The Woman who wasn't Allowed to Keep Cats') convey the varied registers of human emotions and states of mind and range from graceful Indian dancing in a sari (29) to a parody of a Ginger Rogers-Fred Astair dance. Her last performance begins with her miming the movements of a huge predatory bird⁷ but turns farcical as she brings out a revolver and fires blanks at her audience, a gesture for which she is finally committed. The satire of her audience's and the critics' response to her theatrical performances, clearly White's own firing at his critics, seems to have aroused resentment in some reviewers. Yet it is surely not unusual for writers who feel (often rightly) misunderstood to criticise the critics, and Alex's lampooning is child's play compared with William Golding's much fiercer and just as badly received satire of academic criticism in *The Paper Men*. After her release and before her final agony, the best Alex can do is to struggle to remain in a vertical position as she attempts to look inside her 'churning abyss of a mind' (174) before drawing a red line on her blank sheet, the final quintessence of her attempt at self-expression. One is reminded of another dying artist, Gustav von Aschenbach, his reddened mouth a wound like Alex's through the novel, who also had to recognise the tyranny of the senses, the attraction of the abyss, and that 'knowledge... is the abyss' (*Death in Venice* 127, tr. mine).

The basic question Alex asks through her writing is one that George Steiner sees as still central to modern fiction: 'Is there or is there not God? Is there or is there not meaning to being?' (Steiner 220). The reader's question is whether she discovers 'the reason for [her] presence on earth' (157) as she hopes to by acting out her life. And what is one to make of the widening gap between her aspirations and her increasingly desperate, grotesque performances with the Sand Pit theatre group? That her uncertainties prevail to the end is obvious in the title of her play '*Nothing or Something... [or] Something or Nothing*' (155), and neither White nor the reader is allowed to share the vision she comments on in her last breath: 'Is it this — then...?' she whispered, whether in horror or ecstasy' (183). The uncertainty is seldom relieved in the narrative because few of the imaginary experiences she snatches from her 'potful of dreams' (58) and follows up are transfigured into vision; they are either interrupted or end in disaster provoked by her desperate will to pursue them to the end. Their significance lies in her resilience and the determination of the human spirit and imagination to assert themselves to the end, in her enduring faith that journeying through dust and desert can still redeem and that, unlike Beckett whom she is accused of imitating, 'sand, silence and nothingness [are] the possible way to something more positive than life' (144).

⁷ On the bird image see Peter Beason, 'White and Gray: Image Patterns in Patrick White's *Memoirs of Myself in One*', which provides a good analysis of the imagery in the novel as a whole and shows its coherence and consistency.

When after her death Patrick steps into her bed to be looked after by Hilda, he is clearly preparing for his own physical death without any self-pity, simply acknowledging that if he had possessed then exploited Alex to create 'the many images [he] needed to develop [his] own obsessions' (192), she was taking her revenge by leaving him dependent and a prisoner of down-to-earth Hilda. I think Alex is the enigmatic 'Flying Nun' to whom the novel is dedicated. If this book is White's farewell to his obsessions, phantasms and to his imagination, he still managed to round off his work with the sober, quintessential *Three Uneasy Pieces*. There is a clear continuity issuing into final acceptance between the painful search for wholeness in *The Twyborn Affair*, the rebellious last flights of *Memoirs* with its contrapuntal mandala, the Many in One, and the very last word which sums up a life-long quest: WE (*Three Uneasy Pieces* 59) significantly unpunctuated by a full stop.

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